

Achille Claude Debussy

Encyclopedia of World Biography, December 12, 1998

Born: August 22, 1862 in St-Germain-en-Laye, France

Died: March 25, 1918 in Paris, France

Nationality: French

Occupation: Composer

The French composer Achille Claude Debussy (1862-1918) developed a strongly individual style and also created a language that broke definitively with the procedures of classical tonality.

The world having made peace with his innovations by the time of his death, Claude Debussy subsequently came to be regarded as the impressionist composer par excellence--a creator of poetic tone pictures, a master colorist, and the author of many charming miniatures (including *Clair de lune*, *Golliwog's Cake Walk*, and *Girl with the Flaxen Hair*). Only a handful of critics between World Wars I and II were concerned with the historical impact of his accomplishment, the scope of which is gradually coming to be recognized. It is generally accepted today that his coloristic harmonies do not simply "float" but "function" in terms of a structure analogous to the classical tonal structure and are governed by equally lucid concepts of tension and repose.

Claude Debussy was born on August 22, 1862, at St-Germain-en-Laye into an impoverished family. Thanks to his godparents, he was able to enter the Paris Conservatory 10 years later. Although he worked hard to gain a solid grounding, the archaic and mechanical nature of much of what he studied there did not escape him. Still, certain aspects of his training were exciting, notably his introduction to the operas of Richard Wagner.

Attitude to Wagner

In 1884 Debussy won the Prix de Rome for his cantata *L'Enfant prodigue*. In Rome the following year he was homesick for Paris, and he wrote that one of his few solaces was the study of Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*. Not many years later Debussy harshly criticized Wagner, but his scorn seems directed more toward Wagner's dramaturgy than toward his music. Although Debussy could ridicule the *dramatis personae* of *Parsifal*, he did not neglect to add that the opera was "one of the finest monuments of sound that have been raised to the imperturbable glory of music." Throughout his life Debussy was fascinated by the chromatic richness of the Wagnerian style, but in keeping with Verlaine's epigram, "One must take eloquence and wring its neck," he would categorically reject Wagnerian rhetoric. His inclinations were toward conciseness and understatement.

Influence of the Gamelan Orchestra

At the height of his enthusiasm for Wagner, Debussy had an experience as important for his later development as Wagner had been for his beginnings: the revelation of the Javanese gamelan at the Paris World Exposition of 1889. This exotic orchestra, with its variety of bells, xylophones, and gongs, produced a succession of softly percussive effects and cross rhythms that Debussy was later to describe as a "counterpoint by comparison with which that of Palestrina is child's play." What has come to be regarded as the typical impressionist texture--an atmosphere of melodic and harmonic shapes in which dissonant tones are placed so as to reduce their "shock" value to a minimum and heighten their "overtone" value to a

maximum--was a logical conclusion to the explorations in sonority of 19th century European composers. Yet without the specific influence of the gamelan, Debussy might never have realized this texture in all its complexity.

The effect of the experience at the Exposition of 1889 was not immediately manifested in Debussy's work. It was the process of growth in the years 1890-1900 that brought the elements of the exotic music of the gamelan into play with others already discernible in his style and produced a new tonal language. The completion of this process toward the end of the decade can thus serve as a line of demarcation dividing the earlier years, not without their masterpieces--*Ariettes oubliées* (1888), *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1892; Afternoon of a faun), and the String Quartet (1893)--from the period of maturity.

Mature Works

Debussy's first large-scale piece of his mature period, the *Nocturnes* for orchestra (1893-1899), is contemporaneous with the work on his only completed opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1894-1902), based on a play by Maurice Maeterlinck. The notoriety surrounding the premiere of *Pelléas* in 1902 made Debussy the most controversial figure in musical France and divided Paris into two strongly partisan camps.

Two years later Debussy abandoned his wife of five years, Rosalie Texier, to live with and eventually marry Emma Bardac, a woman of some means. The first taste of existence free from material worry seems to have had a beneficial effect on his productivity. During these years he wrote some of his most enduring works: *La Mer* (1905) and *Ibéria* (1908), both for orchestra; *Images* (1905), *Children's Corner Suite* (1908), and two books of *Préludes* (1910-1912), all for piano solo.

Debussy's pieces of the following years show certain marked changes in style. Not as well known as his works of the preceding years but in no way inferior, they have less surface appeal and are therefore more difficult to approach. It is ironic that just when he was exploring new avenues of thought he was in a sense relegated to the shadows by a "radicalism" more sensational than anything connected with *Pelléas* 10 years earlier. Debussy's ballet *Jeux*, his last and most sophisticated orchestral score, which had its premiere on May 15, 1913, was virtually eclipsed by the scandal of Igor Stravinsky's ballet *Sacre du printemps* (Rite of Spring) on May 29. Debussy's ambivalent attitude toward Stravinsky's music may reflect a certain resentment of the younger composer's noisy arrival on the scene. Debussy evinced a genuine, if limited, admiration for Stravinsky's work and even incorporated certain Stravinsky-like effects in *En blanc et noir* (1915) and the *Études* (1915). Whether or not Debussy's general tendency in his late pieces to achieve a drier, less "impressionistic" sound is the direct result of Stravinsky's influence is difficult to say.

When Debussy composed these last-mentioned works, he was already suffering from a fatal cancer. He completed only three of a projected group of six sonatas "for various instruments" (1915-1917). He died in Paris on March 25, 1918.

Characteristics of Debussy's Music

A notable characteristic of Debussy's music is its finesse, but it is a characteristic applicable to almost every other aspect of his artistic behavior as well. His choice of texts to set to music (from Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Maeterlinck), his own efforts in verse for the song set *Proses lyriques* (1894), and his fine prose essays (posthumously compiled under the title *Monsieur Croche, the Dilletante-Hater*) all attest to a culture that must have been mostly innate, since there is so little evidence of it in his early family

life or formal education.

Finesse and understatement would seem to reinforce the mysterious and dreamlike elements in Debussy's music. In this respect his opera *Pelléas* is the key work of his creative life, because through it he not only achieved the synthesis of his mature style, but also in the art of allusion of Maeterlinck's play found the substance of what he could express in music more tellingly than anyone else. The words and actions of the opera pass as if in a dream, but the dream is suffused with an inescapable feeling of dread. Debussy brings to this feeling a disquieting intensity through music of pervasive quiet, broken rarely and only momentarily by outbursts revealing the underlying terror.

Similarly, in *Nuages* (Clouds), the first movement of the *Nocturnes*, the clouds are not cheerful billows in a sunlit sky but ominous signs--of what we cannot be sure. Characteristically, Debussy leaves us with a mystery: he presents us with the imminence of disaster but not disaster itself. Premonition is a force capable of disrupting the amiable surface of Debussy's music and is also one of the music's chief emotional strengths. What is more, it is a symbol of Debussy's position vis-à-vis European music at the turn of the century.

The composer's works have frequently been performed and recorded. In 1999 the group Art of Noise released the concept album *The Seduction of Claude Debussy*. The group blended Debussy's music with drum and bass, opera, jazz, hip hop, and narration. Art of Noise described it as the soundtrack to an imagined film about the composer's life.

Among Debussy's unfinished works is *The Fall of the House of Usher*, a sketchy opera adapted from Edgar Allen Poe's short story of the same title. Opéra Français de New York, in partnership with the French Institute Alliance Française, presented *Debussy and Poe: The Devil in the Belfry & The Fall of the House of Usher*, in 2009. With very little of the composer's music available, the production included several other songs and one of Debussy's piano preludes, as well as his work on another Poe story, "The Devil in the Belfry." Performers read excerpts from Poe's texts.

Further Readings

- The standard biography for many years was Léon Vallas, *Claude Debussy: His Life and Works* (trans. 1933). Its scholarlyness and serious approach give it lasting value. It has been joined in recent years by Edward Lockspeiser's indispensable *Debussy: His Life and Mind* (2 vols., 1962-1965). This study places Debussy in the context of Paris at the turn of the century and gives a vivid picture of an extraordinary moment in France's cultural life. See also Oscar Thompson, *Debussy: Man and Artist* (1937); Rollo H. Myers, *Debussy* (1948); and Victor I. Seroff, *Debussy: Musician of France* (1956). "The Adventure and Achievement of Debussy" in William W. Austin, *Music in the 20th Century* (1966), is a valuable combination of biography and analysis.
- "Debussy's Homage to Poe, with the Blanks Filled In," *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/26/arts/music/26debussy.html?partner=rssnyt&emc=rss> (November 30, 2011).
- "The Seduction of Claude Debussy," Last FM, <http://www.last.fm/music/Art+of+Noise/The+Seduction+of+Claude+Debussy> (November 30, 2011).

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